

# Monstrous Women

English 461-05, Senior Seminar

Dr. Maureen McDonnell

Fall 2009, M 4-6:45 p.m.

Goddard 220

“A woman promoted to sit in the seat of God, that is, to teach, to judge, or to reign above man, is a monster in nature, contrary to God, and a thing most repugnant to His will and ordinance.”

– John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*

“She'll give me nightmares for a week or so;  
*that* I can handle.  
Or she'll turn the water in my well into blood;  
I'll scream when I see it,  
and that will be that.”

– Patricia Smith, *Medusa*

“Many things are true at once.”

– Elizabeth Alexander, *Amistad*



This seminar has a dual focus: to analyze the depiction of “monstrous” women in literature and to explore what those portrayals reveal about what we imagine to be normal and natural. What must women do to be labeled as monstrous or deviant? By analyzing these representations, we are able to witness how this particular group of people began to embody social, religious, and political debates. We will also discuss what these women’s supposed monstrosity reveal about their political and historical contexts, as well as how these texts were used to legitimate social paranoia.

Texts for our class may include Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal*, Lillian Hellman’s *Little Foxes*, and Elizabeth Alexander’s *The Venus Hottentot*.

All English majors who have taken ENG 203 and have senior status are welcome.